Urban Warfare: Its History and Its Future

Roger J. Spiller

Why should a modern army invest its professional energies in understanding urban warfare? Armies are optimized when they are used in the open. Armies are not built to work best in cities. If one would wreck an army, tradition argues, send it into a city. The functions armies serve, their fundamental organizing principles, their modes of command and control, their operational and tactical doctrines, and even the standards by which they judge their success—all are tuned to the wide, open spaces of the field of battle. In such spaces, armies have succeeded more often and more decisively. So goes the argument.

But the origin of these prejudices is rather modern. Frequently, the ancient classic *Art of War* by Sun Tzu is held up as the ultimate argument against taking war into a city. But Sun Tzu's often-quoted strictures against cities should be interpreted as being in the nature of a protest. Scholars tell us that in the ancient China of his day, the arts of fortification and siegecraft were well developed precisely because cities were important in war. Sun Tzu seems most interested in rectifying what he sees as unimaginative tactics in attacking cities. Although he regards attacking cities as the least preferable course of action, his conception of war conduces perfectly with the quickest and least costly way to capture a city—by *chi'i*; that is, by indirect means of feints, espionage, disinformation, subversion, and betrayal. Nor did Sun Tzu think that cities could be ignored. The general who left too many towns and cities behind him as he advanced into the enemy's territory, Sun Tzu wrote, was courting danger.[1]

Once, and for the longest time, cities were integral to the conduct of war. Heavily fortified, snug behind their bastioned walls, cities embodied the strength of the state. Cities could be worth taking: a successful siege—that is, one that was not ruinous to defender and attacker alike—quite often concluded a war decisively. Field engagements, however, did not hold out a promise of decisive victory; one might conduct indecisive operations in disputed zones between one strongpoint and another for years. Decisive field operations were always more difficult than sieges to stage and always posed a sterner test for the armies. Whole wars might pass without seeing a field operation that produced any significant result for those engaged.

Campaigns might simply burn themselves out with no meaningful conclusion at all.[2]

Fortresses and the style of war they represented began declining well before the age of gunpowder hurried them along to obsolescence. Fortresses usually were built at command by those who had the resources to give them life. But cities were a collective enterprise, one of the results of constantly redistributing humans and their labors, usually over a course of centuries. From the Middle Ages onward, and especially in Europe, populations were busily rearranging themselves into towns and cities. Between the years 1100 and 1500, the number of towns in Europe doubled.[3] Most faced their enemies without permanent protection. Even when they were not in the lee of a mighty castle, they managed to survive by putting up fierce and prolonged resistance from behind the crudest defenses. Proper sieges of well-prepared fortresses rarely lasted more than a few months, and certain cities held out just as long. One of the longest sieges recorded in that age was against the city of Acre, which defended itself against Frankish Crusaders for almost three years.[4] While the age of the fortress declined, the modern age of urban warfare was beginning. As Phillipe Contamine has observed, a conqueror might now easily avoid a castle, but "it was absolutely vital to control such centres of economic, administrative, and human resources as were represented by towns."[5]

Cities that were not protected by fortifications posed their own kinds of problems for would-be attackers. An unfortified city, if it was to be defended at all, might be more inclined to defend itself in depth, or along a single avenue of approach, forcing an invader to spend itself from building to building, each of which could be made into a redoubt, until the attacker had dissipated its combat power—or its enthusiasm for the fight. Nor were unfortified cities difficult simply because they could be successfully defended. The very human composition of the city could pose yet another set of difficulties. A city full of terrified civilians or a city swollen with equally terrified refugees could produce a corps' worth of friction without ever firing a shot.

The redistribution of the European population was unprecedented but not unique. The rest of the world matched Europe's new patterns of growth, million for million. In 150 AD, the world's population stood at about 300 million. Sixteen centuries of growth were required to double this number.[6] In 1750, the world's population of 600 million began to rise at a rate never before seen. Only fifty-four more years were to pass before the world's population nearly doubled again. By 1804, the world's population had reached 1 billion.[7] The magnitude of this

demographic surge is so powerful that neither plagues nor wars nor natural calamities have affected its velocity. During the two centuries since reaching the first billion of population, the world has added 5 billion more.[8] The rate of growth has not subsided, but it has changed shape.

In 1804, London was unique among the world's cities because it had attained a population of 1 million, possibly the first city to do so since ancient Rome. Only 100 years later, cities all over the world contained more than a million inhabitants. Now, one estimate holds that the world contains some 30,000 "urban centers," not megalopolises so much as very large cities. Some of these, such as El Alto, Bolivia, now over 500,000 people, are located close to much larger, better-known cities.[9] By the year 2000, the world contained 387 cities with populations of a million or more—sometimes, much more. The most populous urban agglomeration in the world today is Tokyo, with a population of 26.5 million.[10] Not including the city's several contiguous suburbs, the prefecture of Tokyo proper now covers more than 2,000 square kilometers.[11]

According to a recent UN report, within the next five years, global population will be equally divided between urban and rural inhabitants, but virtually all population growth for the next generation is expected to occur in urban areas. Most of these urban areas are in less-developed regions of the world. During the past five years, urban growth in these regions was six times greater than growth in the urban areas of developed nations. In the more developed nations, 75 percent of the population is already urban areas, a figure that, by current estimates, will increase to 84 percent within the next generation. However, in the world's largest urban agglomerations, for reasons not explained, populations tend to decline. Yet, Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Delhi, India, both defied this trend during the past quarter-century, with populations growing at a rate of 7 percent a year.[12] No evidence suggests that there is any fixed point of maximum urban expansion, a point beyond which a city may no longer serve its purposes.[13] Nor, as noted, is it inevitable that a megacity, once embarked on dramatic expansion, will continue to grow. Mexico City's recent history demonstrates that population surges can indeed abate or even reverse themselves for reasons that have nothing to do with urban dysfunction. In this case, a reorientation of national production and consumption was the proximate cause for revising the city's growth estimates downward.[14]

The world's many cities are as varied as the societies that built them. The standard, common, or normal city does not exist. Cities can be

broadly distinguished from one another, however. Geography can impose its own kind of tyranny over how a city grows. Cities that are sited on coastal plains like Tokyo, or those such as Lagos that occupy coastal or estuarial islands, have only so much land available to them. Cities dominated by a particular industry or activity often incorporate it into their design. Capital cities usually fix their national institutions near a ceremonial center where monuments are more numerous than people. This seems to hold true whether the city was originally built for that purpose or later adapted. Washington, DC, St. Petersburg, and Brasilia are modern examples of the former. London, Paris, Berlin, and Tokyo did not begin as capitals but eventually assumed the role. It is possible, too, to distinguish between cities by how they respond to certain social or technical developments. Los Angeles and the automobile culture virtually grew up together, with the result that few cities in the world are so highly integrated with this form of transportation as is L.A. By contrast, modern Athens was required like so many other ancient cities to transplant modern transport patterns onto an urban structure that had not greatly changed in centuries. Comparing cities by one feature or another can be interesting, but it is perhaps not the most effective way to understand the uniqueness of a given city. In this respect, a city is more like a book, to be read and understood on its own terms.

Even so, the modern urbanographer and the modern military professional are unlikely to see a city in the same way. Rio de Janeiro's 764 *favelas*—poverty-ridden urban zones distinguished more by the boundaries of the criminal gangs who operate in them than by any division of orthodox government—may seem to the urban planner to be a collection of political, economic, and, above all, social challenges. The military planner may wonder how—if there is no choice—to move large bodies of soldiers through this zone or whether it is even possible for an army to wrest control from the "federation of gangs" that dominates it.[15] While population and urban experts can contend, theoretically, with China's "floating population" of 100 million homeless agricultural workers displaced by rural modernization and collecting in the nation's cities (1 million in Beijing alone), what theories can a commander and military planner draw upon to contend with his mission in densely populated urban areas?[16]

The art of war clearly has not kept pace with the progressively more complex global urban environment. As a consequence, the military profession is ill equipped to meet the unique demands of modern urban warfare. Unable to avoid operating in urban environments, traditional

armed forces tend to regress, their tactics devolving to the lowest common denominator, surrendering the initiative to better-prepared adversaries. Forced to resort to expediencies and improvisations, trial and error, and experiments in the face of the enemy, orthodox military forces face the danger of escalation past the point their strategy can sustain and costs they can endure.

But history has never waited for military theory to catch up, so it has been to history that soldiers have turned to prepare themselves for the battlefields of the future. Each of the twelve cases presented in this volume has been the subject of earlier full-length studies. These larger studies focus on the dramatic and unique characteristics of the events they address. The value of studying these cases in a collective set, however, is that they can be held up in the light of each other. By doing so, one may begin to build a professionally useful body of knowledge about this unique class of military operations.

Just how far urban operations diverge from orthodox military operations can be seen in how differently they are planned and conducted, the constraints under which they labor, how their progress is judged, as well as the results they produce. Sometimes, urban operations are so different from orthodoxy that they seem to belong to another war altogether—as if what happened inside the city had little reference to what happened beyond it. No one involved in the battle of Aachen, on either the Allied or the German side, would have seen the city as being important to a larger fabric of operations. The Germans did not intend to hold the city, and the Allies only wanted to get around it. As Christopher Gabel points out in his case study of the battle, the road network would have accommodated the Allies' original strategy quite nicely. Half of the city had already been destroyed by Allied bombing, although exactly why is unclear because it was not a vital industrial center to begin with. In keeping with the lack of importance both sides assigned to the city, neither side was prepared to fight inside the city. But neither was Adolf Hitler's direct intervention expected, an intervention that had nothing to do with military necessity and everything to do with misplaced sentimentalism. So the German army did not after all withdraw from the city, the Allies could not leave them there, and thus a city battle was fought for reasons of nostalgia as much as any other. Furthermore, while the combat inside the city took on its own character, the rest of the war moved on as before.

Among the cases collected here, the most extreme example of politics and sentiment investing a city with importance is that of Stalingrad. Although Stalingrad is now seen as the archetypical urban

battle during World War II, it resembled Aachen in that neither side saw the city as critical to its strategic or operational plans. Neither the German General Staff nor the Soviet *Stavka* assigned much importance to the place. The German army would very likely have passed through Stalingrad on the way to greater prizes in the east had not Joseph Stalin made an issue of the place. That done, Hitler complied enthusiastically. Thus the stage was set for one of the most vicious battles of the twentieth century. While the city might have been of negligible military importance at first, the opposing national leaders ensured that it would grow to strategic proportions.[17]

While neither of the battles for Aachen or Stalingrad could be said to have been intentional and neither was the result of deliberate military planning, the battle for Hue was a critical element in a much larger strategic conception. As Vietnam's old Imperial city, Hue was a cultural icon as well as being politically important. Partly because of its significance, all sides had treated Hue as something of an "open" city, immune to the war that had engulfed the rest of the country. For two years, North Vietnamese strategists planned the campaign known to history as the Tet Offensive. Operational and tactical preparation for the assault on the city itself began six months before the attack. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) worked to create complete surprise, and its work paid off. For a time, Hue was under control of the NVA.[18] South Vietnamese and American reinforcements to shore up defenses and retake overrun districts were all deployed in the manner of a military emergency—in other words, a think-as-you-go crisis response, always the least acceptable, most expensive course of action.

For all the initial advantages the NVA enjoyed, they were insufficient to guarantee success. The North Vietnamese intended the battle for Hue to conclude promptly and decisively. When their plans were disappointed, they were forced into a series of tactical compromises, including an attempt to reinforce their battle from beyond the city itself. Eventually, the South Vietnamese and the Americans took the initiative away from the NVA. What began as a coup de main ended as a kind of siege in reverse, from the inside out.

Coups de main are not always failures. Nor are coups de main cheap operations, although the importance of subversion, preparation, and speed sometimes may create false expectations of decisive action. Also, unless these sorts of operations are supported properly, they all too often reverse the attackers' fortunes. The NVA's preparations for taking Hue followed the common practice of infiltrating the city well before what the attackers expected would be their decisive blow. The

same was true in two other cases here, the Soviet Union's seizure of Kabul and the American seizure of Panama City. In both cases, the attackers enjoyed virtually overwhelming advantages, and both were so planned.

The Soviets came very close to underestimating the regular forces that would be required to consummate the seizure of Kabul. The Americans, on the other hand, were in the peculiar position of invading themselves, so long and well established was their presence throughout Panama. In both cases, the lure of quick, decisive action was too great for the planners to resist. The Americans' concept for invading Panama had a considerably larger scope than the Soviets' concept for Kabul. The Americans planned their invasion to attack many decisive targets as nearly simultaneously as they could to interdict any possible response, but what they wanted in the end was a decision in Panama City. Panama City was the only place, in fact, where decision could be found. The same was true of Kabul, but there the decision had a much shorter life than the one in Panama. The attack on Kabul merely initiated a decade of unrewarding counterinsurgency warfare from which the Soviets had trouble extricating themselves.

Coups de main have never been quite as easy or quite as decisive as they have seemed. But coups de main may be verging on a new popularity if military thinkers can find ways to win a quick decision with new combinations of specialized forces, precision weapons, and cybernetic attack. Conceived in this manner, the coup de main seems a very modern kind of operation, one that aims at only those elements and functions of enemy power that contribute to his resistance. What is more certain is that the very notion of attacking even moderately large cities such as Grozny in the old-fashioned way—first isolating, then dividing the whole into ever smaller areas, reducing the defenders to their final redoubts—is absurd. Any attacking force that takes on an urban population hoping for a soft, compliant target is risking the dissipation of its combat power well before it meets its primary objective.

The presence of civilians, sometimes in the midst of battle, is one characteristic that makes urban warfare unique among all other forms of war. People trapped in cities by war have persisted in the most inhospitable conditions imaginable. A modern urban population may react stoically to the presence of foreign soldiers, but even noncombatant populations must continue to function, no matter what. For an invading army, even the most welcoming population constitutes a kind of resistant medium in which that army must continue to execute its mission. If

the fight for a city is part of a larger campaign—such as in the battle for Aachen—fighting elsewhere might drive a new population of refugees into the city, replacing those who had evacuated earlier and arriving just when city services had been wrecked.

All too often, combatant forces have found ways to use civilians to their advantage. In Manila, Hue, Grozny, Beirut, and certainly Sarajevo, civilian noncombatants became critical and, at times, decisive elements of the engagement. Most commonly, the influence of noncombatants will work to the advantage of one side or another; they are rarely a "neutral" force. In the battle for Hue, for instance, South Vietnamese and American rules of engagement would not allow the employment of certain weapons, but the NVA was bound by no such tactical restrictions. Concern for noncombatant casualties in Beirut was said to have prevented the Israelis from penetrating the city's defenses in 1983. In this instance, the Israeli Defense Forces had to contend with the Palestinian refugee camps that worked as a human buffer for the Palestine Liberation Organization defenders behind them in the city proper. By contrast, the siege of Sarajevo was quite explicitly a siege against the noncombatants of the city, inaugurated, as Curt King's essay makes clear, when orthodox military operations failed to deliver the desired result. Sarajevans were, in effect, made hostage to military operations elsewhere, far from the eyes of the international public.

The urban environment, considered in military terms, is a unique environment, both in terms of its essential character and its behavior. Faced with the complexities of this environment, military analysts have resorted to explaining cities as a "system of systems," as if cities were only the product of architectural designs and engineers' drawings. Those would not be cities but monuments. The first, most elementary, feature of any urban environment is that it is a place where people have collected more or less permanently. It is therefore to the human qualities of the urban environment the military planner must first look if he hopes to understand how armies can function in such a place.

When a military force acts in an urban environment, its essential humanness guarantees that the environment acts in return; that is, the relationship between a force and a city is *dynamic*. The dynamic interaction between cities and the military forces operating in them redefines and reshapes those forces over time. Because of its dynamic quality, the urban environment works as an important "third force," uniquely influencing the behavior of all sides engaged. This fundamental interaction cannot be ignored by the armies engaged, regardless of how long or how intensive their operations.

Nor may we assume that the peculiarities of the urban environment will redound to the benefit of one side or another. As Al Lowe has observed in his essay on the long battle for Rio de Janeiro, early in the *Montoneros*' career as urban insurgents, they were happy to adopt the style of the *guerrillero*, fighting a war of poverty against orthodox Argentine forces. But as the war dragged on, both sides gravitated toward each other's methods. Unorthodox methods were increasingly adopted by the state, which conducted its own version of guerrilla operations against the *Montoneros*, including using extralegal death squads. Meanwhile, the methods of the *guerrilleros* slowly became more orthodox until, paradoxically, the movement's appeal to its power base among the urban poor gradually disappeared. Doubtless, neither side expected the environment itself to exercise this kind of power over its behavior.

The commander who enters a modern city unprepared will soon be forced to acknowledge critical differences in how he must operate if he is to accomplish his mission. The cost of everything will go up. He will need more forces and perhaps different forces; more transport, not for his troops but to evacuate noncombatants; or civil affairs specialists to deal with a variety of political and social issues. The presence of refugees and local noncombatants will mean that medical support will be tugged in two directions, toward the rear as well as the front. And in the fighting zones, casualties will begin to mount. Indeed, the historical record consistently shows a rapid increase in the consumption rates of all classes of military supply when a force engages in city combat. These differences are so great that the commander might think he had passed from one theater of operations to another. In a way, he has.

Perhaps the first difference the commander would notice is that his mission had to assume a different shape and his force had to adopt different methods. Time-honored combat formations designed for open fighting would reorganize themselves into ever-smaller groups, perhaps even without his intervention. Command and control would not work as it had. The fluidity with which his force had originally maneuvered would be impeded by the medium in which it now attempted to move. Inconsiderable distances would become deliberate advances under full protection. An attack across a boulevard would take on the character of a river crossing. While the mission tempo would subside, the tactical tempo would intensify. Smaller acts would mean more. Tactical forces would combat smaller targets more fiercely. Buildings would become campaigns, stairs would become avenues of approach, and rooms would become fortresses. In just this

way, the worst urban battles of the twentieth century assumed their own shapes and purposes. The battles for the tractor factory in Stalingrad, for the Zoo Flak Tower in Berlin, for the fortress at Manila, and for the Citadel at Hue all exploded the best laid plans of commanders on the spot, forcing them to submit to the tactical demands of the moment.

Modern armies would be mistaken to assume that battles such as these are impossible in the future. The first battle for Grozny that Timothy Thomas describes here, as well as succeeding battles for the city, serves as a warning for those armies that underestimate the challenges of modern urban warfare. Ill-prepared, poorly led, poorly supported, and thrown recklessly against a determined defender whose military assets were modest, a ramshackled Russian army ignored its own history, using firepower as a substitute for thought. Almost a decade after the adversaries began fighting, neither side seems to recognize that fighting is only a means, not an end, certainly not a way of life. So Grozny takes its place alongside those urban battles that have devolved from purpose to habit, where exhaustion rather than the military art offers the only way out. No policy maker or professional soldier should be willing to accept such a verdict.

Modern urban warfare is neither a completely new or completely old military phenomenon; as usual, it is some of both. It is not a phenomenon beyond the reach of professional understanding, and in the past several years, a reawakening of professional interest has occurred around the military world. The professional soldier now has within reach a substantial historical and contemporary literature from which the foundation of new military doctrines and practices can be built. This casebook has been written to contribute to that foundation.

Notes

1. By Sun Tzu's reckoning, the general placed his army in "critical terrain." Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Samuel B. Griffith, trans. and ed., foreword by B.H. Liddell Hart (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 38-39, 78-79. See also *Sun-Tzu The Art of Warfare*, Roger Ames, trans. (NY: Ballantine Books, 1993), 111-12, 439.

2. Phillipe Contamine, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages*, Michael Jones, trans. (London: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 219.

3. Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meaning Through History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991; paperback, 1999), 108-110.

4. Contamine, 101.

5. Ibid.

6. Kostof, 108-110.

7. The Population Council, "Population," in *The Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 99*, 4 (CD-ROM).

8. United Nations (UN), "The World at Six Billion" (NY: UN Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1999), b-2, b-3 at <http://www.un.org/popin>, accessed 1999.

9. Eugene Linden, "The Exploding Cities of the Developing World," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 1996), 54-55.

10. This figure includes all inhabitants within Tokyo's urban agglomeration as calculated by the UN Population Division. The UN employs the term "agglomeration" to designate only those urban areas that exceed a population of 10 million. The UN employs the term "small cities" for urban areas of 500,000 and less. See UN Population Division, "World Urbanization Prospects: The 2001 Revision; Data Tables and Highlights" (NY: UN Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 21 March 2002), 1-3, 172. Accessible at <http://www.un.org/popin>, accessed November 2002, hereafter cited as "World Urbanization Prospects."

11. Tokyo.gov, "The Official Tokyo Metro Website" at <http://www.chijihonbu.metro.tokyo.jp>, accessed November 2002.

12. "World Urbanization Prospects," 1-3.

13. This is not to say that once urban growth begins it cannot level off or even reverse itself. Demographic estimates are not predictions of the future. In 1973, estimates of Mexico City's population at century's end ran higher than 30 million, but global and national markets changed radically in the meantime and influenced how economic activity in Mexico was distributed. See Linden, 54.

14. Ibid.

15. David E. Kaplan, "The Law of the Jungle," *U.S. News and World Report* (14 October 2002), 35.

16. Linden, 54.

17. I have discussed the operational value of Stalingrad more extensively in *Sharp Corners: Urban Operations at Century's End* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2001), 59-60.

18. See Ronnie E. Ford, *TET 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), especially 66-86.